

# Fundamentals of Nepalese Dalit Aesthetics

Aesthetics, broadly defined, is the philosophical study of beauty, art, and taste, and their interrelations with human society and nature. It explores how humans perceive and create beauty and meaning through artistic expression. In the context of social consciousness, particularly from a Marxist perspective, aesthetics transcends mere appreciation of beauty and becomes a reflection of social realities and class dynamics. The interaction between the natural world and human society produces artistic expressions that are deeply embedded in the socio-economic conditions of their time. Thus, aesthetics is not static but evolves dialectically, growing from simple, often folk understandings of beauty to more complex and refined cultural articulations.

In Nepal, the discourse on Dalit aesthetics is gaining momentum, particularly among Dalit intellectuals and activists who advocate for the integration of Marxist theory with Dalit cultural expression. This synthesis is seen as a powerful tool for emancipation. The Maoist insurgency and other left-wing movements in Nepal have played a pivotal role in carving out space for Dalit voices within the broader struggle against feudal and caste oppression. The **Maoist cultural wing**, in particular, has been instrumental in mobilizing Dalits and other oppressed groups through cultural forms such as songs, skits, and street theatre, which serve both as educational tools and as catalysts for class consciousness.

The cultural wing's role was not merely to entertain but to awaken a political awareness that challenged the entrenched hierarchies of caste and class. Through these artistic interventions, Dalits found a platform to articulate their grievances and aspirations, forging a collective identity rooted in resistance.

## Dalit Aesthetics and the Question of Relevance

A central question posed by Dalit cultural theorist Ghanshayam Dhakal is: "*Who needs Dalit aesthetics?*" This inquiry probes the very purpose and audience of Dalit artistic expression in a society deeply stratified by caste. Dalits, historically marginalized and oppressed within Hindu society, have been subjected to systemic exclusion and dehumanization. Dhakal argues that the liberation of Dalits is fundamentally linked to class liberation, suggesting that Dalit aesthetics must be understood within the framework of a broader cultural struggle—a "war"—that manifests through artistic production and countercultural resistance.

Dhakal champions **Marxist aesthetics** as the most effective framework for Dalit resistance, emphasizing class struggle over caste identity as the primary axis of oppression. He contends that Dalits resonate more with the concept of class liberation than with abstract critiques of caste structures embedded in Hinduism. However, this perspective, while valuable, overlooks the inseparable nature of caste and class in South Asian societies. Caste is not merely a social category but a lived reality that permeates every aspect of Dalit existence. Even affluent Dalits remain socially "untouchable" in the eyes of upper-caste groups. Therefore, any aesthetic theory addressing Dalit experiences must grapple with the dual realities of caste and class oppression, recognizing their complex interplay.

## The Contradiction of Dalit Performances in Brahminical Society

Dalit cultural performances in Nepal are deeply rooted in the traditions of castes such as the **Damai**, **Gaine**, and **Badi**, who have historically been assigned specific roles within the social performance culture. These roles encompass music, dance, drama, and other performative arts that are integral to Nepalese social and religious life.

Unlike scripted theatrical performances, Dalit performances are often spontaneous, improvisational, and occasion-driven. They thrive on the energy of the moment and the communal participation of audiences during significant social events such as weddings, funerals, and festivals. These performances serve not only as entertainment but also as vital mechanisms for social cohesion and cultural continuity within Dalit communities.

However, a fundamental contradiction persists. While Dalit performers provide indispensable cultural services to upper-caste patrons—such as playing the **Panchai Baja** (a traditional five-instrument ensemble) at important rituals—the performers themselves remain socially marginalized and stigmatized. They are often barred from entering the sacred spaces where these rituals occur and are relegated to the periphery of social life. This paradox highlights the caste system's deeply entrenched hierarchies, where Dalit contributions are simultaneously indispensable and devalued.

## Dalit Performances and Protest: The Role of the Panchai Baja

The **Panchai Baja** is more than a musical ensemble; it has become a symbol of Dalit cultural identity and resistance in Nepal. Traditionally, the Panchai Baja was essential for conducting religious rites among upper-caste Hindus. Over time, however, Dalit musicians, especially from the Damai community, have transformed these performances into acts of protest against caste-based exclusion and discrimination.

By asserting the significance of their art beyond ritual utility, Dalit performers challenge the social order that confines them to subordinate roles. Their music and performances become a form of subversion, reclaiming dignity and demanding recognition. This cultural assertion is mirrored in the Terai plains of Nepal, where Dalit performers engage in folk dance-dramas during social ceremonies, echoing similar caste-based performance traditions found in rural India.

## Caste and Performance: A South Asian Parallel

The caste-based division of labor in the performing arts is a widespread phenomenon across South Asia. In India, Dalit groups such as the **Gadia Lohars**, **Nats**, and other minstrel communities have historically been assigned roles as musicians, dancers, and storytellers. These groups have been socially ostracized, yet their cultural productions are central to the religious and social life of upper-caste communities.

Similarly, in Nepal, Dalit performers occupy a paradoxical position: they are culturally indispensable yet socially marginalized. Their artistic contributions sustain the rituals and festivals of dominant castes, but they remain excluded from full social participation. This dynamic underscores the persistence of caste as a system of social exclusion that operates alongside economic and political hierarchies.

# The Role of Material Resources in Caste Domination

Scholar **Mary M. Cameron** emphasizes that caste domination is perpetuated not only through ideological means but also through material inequalities. The asymmetry in access to resources—land, education, economic opportunities—reinforces caste hierarchies and privileges upper-caste groups. Dalit cultural practices and performances exist within this broader framework of economic and social subjugation.

The material deprivation experienced by Dalits limits their ability to fully develop and disseminate their cultural expressions. At the same time, the economic dependence of Dalit performers on upper-caste patrons perpetuates their subordinate status. Thus, any effort to understand or transform Dalit aesthetics must also address the underlying material conditions that sustain caste-based oppression.

## Differentiation Between Nepalese and Indian Dalits

While Nepalese and Indian Dalits share many experiences of caste-based discrimination, their historical and political contexts differ significantly. Nepal's caste system was codified and reinforced by the **Muluki Ain** (National Code), heavily influenced by Hindu texts like the **Manu Smriti**, which institutionalized caste hierarchies and untouchability.

Unlike India, Nepal's Dalit movement has been relatively less militant and more constrained by the political dominance of the monarchy and entrenched Brahminical values. The legal and social frameworks in Nepal have historically limited Dalit mobilization and activism. This has resulted in a more passive Dalit movement compared to India's vibrant and often confrontational Dalit politics.

## Conclusion

Dalit aesthetics in Nepal encapsulate the contradictions and struggles of a community caught between cultural indispensability and social exclusion. The **Panchai Baja** and other Dalit performance arts are not only vital to Nepalese social rituals but also serve as powerful mediums of resistance and identity assertion.

These cultural expressions reflect the complex interplay of caste and class oppression, revealing both the resilience and the challenges faced by Dalits. While Dalit aesthetics provide a platform for reclaiming dignity and challenging social hierarchies, the broader question remains whether these artistic forms can catalyze systemic change.

The integration of **Marxist theory** with Dalit cultural critique offers a promising framework to understand and confront the intertwined oppressions of caste and class in Nepal. It highlights the necessity of addressing both ideological and material dimensions of domination to achieve genuine emancipation.

## Bibliography

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